

# **Teaching Assistant Handbook**

Department of Comparative Literature

Brown University

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## Introduction: Teaching Assistantship in Comparative Literature

By definition, TAs assist professors with running their class; in return, they gain teaching experience, benefit from their lead professor's experience, and receive a stipend. A TA has responsibilities to two main constituencies: their lead professor, and their students. It goes without saying that both are entitled to a completely professional relation, including punctuality, confidentiality, and honesty. Conversely, a TA is entitled to be treated respectfully by both faculty and students.

The main responsibilities of a Graduate TA in Brown's Department of Comparative Literature are as follows:

- Communicate regularly with the professor running the course
- Attend course lectures
- Grade undergraduate assignments and provide constructive feedback
- Hold office hours for one-to-two hours per week during the semester. You can use the graduate student office in Marston Hall for this; you are also welcome to find another location if it better suits your needs (see "Resources" for suggestions)
- Run undergraduate sections (variable, generally one eighty-minute section/week): this is frequent, but not systematic. Some professors will instead ask you only to provide writing support, and perhaps give one or more lectures
- Miscellaneous course support as needed, e.g. Photocopying, assisting professor in producing exam questions, updating the class website, putting books on reserve at the library, etc.

This handbook is meant as an overview of useful resources and good questions that you may find useful during your years as Graduate TA in the Department of Comparative Literature. It is meant to be supplemented by a Google drive ("Graduate TA Google drive") administered by Tracy Miller.

## TAs' Contractual Obligations, Code of Conduct, and Rights

At least two years of work as a teaching assistant are required for the Ph.D. As a rule, the Graduate Program in Comparative Literature never waives the teaching requirement. On rare occasions, however, it may consider reducing it for a student who prefers to finish the degree program as quickly as possible, with limited training in teaching (but in no case less than one year). Such instances will require the student to be financially supported by an outside source such as the armed forces, religious orders, or foreign governments. Under this category fall those supported by the Mellon Foundation or by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) which offer full-time support for part of the time required to complete the degree. Mellon and SSHRC recipients teach during the rest of their training.

International graduate students require English language certification before serving as teaching assistants in their departments. Graduate students who have been awarded teaching assistantships and whose native language is not English must be tested for English proficiency before they begin teaching. It is recommended that students take the evaluation at the beginning of their first year. According to Graduate School policy, if a student's English language skills do not meet the minimum standards for certification, provisional approval of their teaching assistantship appointment may be made on condition that the student take remedial action agreed upon with the department. However, unless the department grants special approval, *students who have not been certified at the appropriate level for the classroom or laboratory will not be supported as teaching assistants past the first year.*

To schedule an English proficiency evaluation, contact [Jill Stewart](mailto:Jill_Stewart@brown.edu) (Jill\_Stewart@brown.edu.) The [Center for Language Studies website offers more information](https://www.brown.edu/academics/language-studies/english-international-teaching-assistants-program), including evaluation requests: <https://www.brown.edu/academics/language-studies/english-international-teaching-assistants-program>.

Per graduate school policies, a teaching assistantship should not require more than twenty hours of work per week. Most professors evaluate their TAs' workload to be between ten and fifteen hours most weeks, with potential peaks when mid-term and final papers are due (as applicable). Most graduate students report an effective working time between fifteen and twenty weekly hours, still within the graduate school's standards. It is recommended that graduate students monitor the time they spend on class preparation and grading each week. If you are well above the average, the situation could be detrimental to your research obligations and personal life, and should be addressed. If you are well under it, on the other hand, it is worth checking that you are giving your students the attention they deserve.

It is perfectly within the faculty member's rights, in keeping with your training as a university teacher, to ask you to deliver a lecture or two, help plan the syllabus, enter into dialogue with him or her in the classroom, participate in a planned panel or debate, or develop some new material for the course. Additionally, it is your responsibility to ask the faculty member running the course when the heavy-duty periods of the semester come and to plan your work accordingly.

Prior to the beginning of the semester, your faculty supervisor should:

- Provide you with a copy of the course syllabus (including course objectives)
- Provide you with required textbooks, or let you know how to access them
- Meet with you to communicate expectations, including how often you will be meeting, and answer your questions
- Give you an idea of what they expect to happen in section or how you are expected to support students outside of class
- Offer advice on getting started (see also the "Sample Checklist for a First Section" and "Facilitating Effective Group Discussion" documents in the Graduate TA Google drive)

Also note that you are *not*:

- Expected to do all of the grading. This work should be divided equitably between all members of the pedagogical team (the TAs and their faculty supervisor)
- Expected to lead more than one section per semester

Finally, final grades are ultimately the faculty member's responsibility, so there should be a clear understanding between you and your supervisor as to how your authority is supposed to interact with theirs. See also "Grading" on this point.

### ***Grievance Procedures***

Students having trouble with a faculty member who are unable to come to a resolution directly with them, should consult the DGS. They also have the possibility to discuss their situation with the Dean of the Graduate School should they want advice external to the

department, or to appeal to the [Ombuds Office](#) to receive neutral and informal support in resolving the conflict (please consult <https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/ombudsperson/> for more information). Finally, while they have no official role in the process, you can also turn to your department's graduate student representatives if you want student observers in your discussions with the faculty. If these less formal and local measures fail, students can then turn to the Graduate School's university-wide grievance procedures. They can be consulted at <http://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/grievance-procedures>.

If one of your students complains about your teaching and you cannot resolve the problem yourself, you should consult with the course supervisor. If the issue cannot be resolved at that point, you should take the matter to the DGS. In cases where there is some disagreement between you and the faculty member or between either and the DGS, the Chair will review the evidence, discuss the matter with everyone involved, and report his or her conclusions in writing to you. If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of this process, you are always free to pursue the Graduate School's grievance procedures.

## Faculty Perspectives

Contrary to what may happen in other departments and at other colleges, professors in the Comparative Literature department never have a more experienced TA in charge of organizing the team and/or assisting others (“Head TAs”). This is rare at Brown in general, so you should not expect to encounter the situation, but you should be aware that our department does seem to be distinctively invested in giving TAs a lot of freedom to organize their own classes or sections. If you run a section, your lead professor will not impose lesson plans, nor will they normally ask to see yours. Because sections are most often simultaneous and professors teach one of them, they will also not usually observe you in the classroom. This is a level of both autonomy and responsibility that you may not encounter in other departments and it will therefore be important for you to be well organized, so that your sections and office hours do not devolve into *extempore* chats with your students.

Professors who answered the survey for this handbook expect you to base your teaching on the material covered in class. In classes with sections, most professors organize short weekly meetings between professor(s) and TA(s) to go over what they absolutely want explained in section, and to generate topics for discussion. You are not expected to do readings beyond the syllabus to prepare for class, although if the subject matter is completely new to you, it could be worth consulting a good critical introduction or teaching reference to help you plan and manage your section. You are however emphatically *not* expected to be a specialist by the time you interact with students, nor to pass for one. It is fine to table questions for the next section or to suggest resources for students to do further research by themselves. Your ability to read a text at graduate level will provide you with plenty of stimulating ideas to develop your students’ own reading and writing know-how.

Professors will occasionally offer TAs the opportunity to teach a class (i.e. to lecture), but they do not generally impose it. The offer is not systematic, so if you are particularly interested in doing so, be sure to let the professor know.

The same human qualities were generally emphasized by all professors: first and foremost, they expect their TAs to respect students, and to encourage their love and interest for the class and for literature more broadly. One professor nicely summed it up as “love of literature, interest in young people, pleasure in getting them excited about books, and in having them develop writing and critical skills.” The emphasis on “writing skills,” however, varied from

professor to professor, and class to class: an advanced seminar for a concentrator is likely to require more attention to good writing than an introductory survey with a varied student body. At the beginning of the semester, it may therefore be valuable to clarify with your supervisor how much importance they give to things such as a paper's technical aspects (grammar, word choice, organization) or research skills (references, proper citations, etc.). Be clear with your students about your expectations from the start of the class, and let them know in advance how you will be assessing their work. This is a discussion that is especially valuable to hold if you will not be running your own section, as the decreased exposure to your expectations may otherwise be confusing to students.

Finally, you can take advantage of the freedom you have in section to organize mini-tutorials on aspects of reading and writing for the course if the need arises (see "Resources" for more information on this point). If you are not running a section, but instead act as a resource to support student writing, you can also supplement one-on-one mentoring sessions with general workshops (although, for scheduling reasons, you should not make attendance to such work sessions mandatory).

## Other Teaching Opportunities

The Department of Comparative Literature offers its graduate students many opportunities to accrue teaching experience beyond that of holding a teaching assistantship in a Comparative Literature class. Some of these opportunities are the results of university-wide programs, and some are located within the department. Below is a survey of such possibilities; if you discover or want to suggest additional ideas, please bring them to the DGS for discussion.

### *Teaching in Another Department*

You may, for a limited time during your period of study, hold a teaching assistantship in another department or program. For instance, it is relatively common for graduate students in Comparative Literature to hold language instructor positions for a semester or two, or to TA in MCM, English Studies, or other affiliated departments. Such positions can make your resume more appealing on the academic market, especially if they give you a chance to lead your own classrooms or to gain experience in a department for which you may apply in the future. Of course, even when teaching in other fields is important to your training, you should do a significant portion of your teaching in the department, and departmental needs may occasionally take priority over graduate student wishes. Nonetheless, be sure to let your faculty mentor or DGS know your preference and interests if you have them. The department always does its best to accommodate them.

When arranging to work in another department, please contact the department ASAP to find out if they have requirements for teaching in their department. Some departments hold mandatory TA instructor orientations, or may request that you take a pedagogical class before teaching for them. These requirements are department-specific, or sometimes class-specific, so be sure to check.

### *Teaching Exchanges*

Graduate students can benefit from several teaching exchanges:

- Brown/Wheaton Faculty Fellows Program: Brown University graduate students in their third, fourth, and fifth years may apply to teach courses at Wheaton College. The application process takes place a year prior to that in which selected applications begin teaching. All applicants must have advanced to candidacy stage and have taught at Brown for a minimum of two years. Each year, Wheaton requests proposals for

courses in several departments from which it selects a few that the fellows develop with Wheaton faculty mentors. In addition to their classes, fellows are integrated into the department's administrative life for the year, making the program a chance to experience the atmosphere of a teaching-oriented institution. See <https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/academics-research/teaching-fellowships-advanced-students/brownwheaton-faculty-fellows-program> for more information. Note that applications must be submitted to Wheaton College by the last Friday in January.

- Brown University–Tougaloo Partnership's Faculty Fellows Program: advanced graduate students may also apply to teach for one semester at Tougaloo College through the Brown-Tougaloo Partnership. The application process is slightly different, as you will need to identify and work with a mentor at Tougaloo College to develop your course proposal. Application deadlines are February 15 (to teach in the fall) and October 15 (for the spring). For more information, see <https://www.brown.edu/academics/college/special-programs/tougaloo/programs/faculty-fellows-program>.
- There are also a limited number of teaching exchanges with universities abroad administered through the various language departments, including our department's exchange with Université de Paris-Est Créteil; consult the DGS in our department and corresponding language departments for details on these opportunities.

## *Teaching Your Own Class at Brown*

### **Summer school**

Graduate students are eligible to propose courses for Brown Continuing Education's Undergraduate and Pre-Collegiate Summer Session, organized by the School of Professional Studies. Proposals are due to SPS early in November each year (Nov. 1<sup>st</sup> in 2016, for teaching a class in the summer of 2017). At this stage, they do not involve a detailed syllabus, which you will develop later, but an indication of the topic of your course, your pedagogical approach, main texts, etc. You can also get in touch with SPS to discuss whether there are already-developed classes that are in need of an instructor or teaching assistant. These classes are paid, and can supplement your summer stipend to a living summer wage. They are also quite intensive (often several hours a day, every day), so be prepared to be fully dedicated to your teaching during the period that your class runs. Summer classes generally are between one and three weeks in duration.

More information and forms are accessible on the website

<http://www.brown.edu/ce/faculty/course-proposal.php>.

### **Teaching Your Own Class in the Department**

Advanced graduate students who have made substantial progress on their dissertations, who can document their success in the classroom, and who have the support of a faculty member willing to serve as a classroom mentor, are invited to submit a proposal to teach an undergraduate course (below 1000-level) in the department. The proposal consists of a 100-word course description, a syllabus, a C.V. that includes a listing of teaching experience, and notes of support from the dissertation adviser and a faculty mentor. It is due to the Director of Graduate Studies no later than October 31 of the academic year before the class is taught. The department's Graduate Committee will evaluate the proposal. No more than two proposals will be approved in any year and a final approval depends on the curricular needs of the department as determined by the Chair.

## Pedagogical Training

The department now offers this handbook, in addition to a short orientation before your first semester of teaching. You can also obtain supplementary pedagogical training through a number of campus centers and resources. Some of them, like the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning or the Writing Center, also offer opportunities for paid work on campus.

### *The Harriet W Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning*

The Sheridan, as it is known on campus, offers a range of services and resources to graduate students and faculty seeking to improve their teaching effectiveness. See the [Sheridan Center's website](https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/) (<https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/>) and the [Departmental Sheridan Representative](https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/people/departmental-liaisons) (<https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/people/departmental-liaisons>) for additional information.

#### **1. New TA Orientation**

New TA Orientation to Teaching at Brown is a half-day event, which includes speakers, workshops, and small group discussion about teaching. Students in the Comparative Literature Department are encouraged to participate at the beginning of their second year.

#### **2. Consultation Services**

A range of consulting services is available to all graduate students, regardless of whether they are involved in Sheridan Certificate programs. There is no cost and no limit to the number of consultations one may request. The most popular services are Teaching Observations and Presentation Consultations; see the section on “Getting Feedback” for more details.

#### **3. Certificate Programs**

The Sheridan Center offers a number of certificate programs on a rotating basis, in which participants develop and reflect on their teaching practice and prepare for professional careers. As the programs are currently undergoing reevaluation and revisions, we recommend that you check [the Sheridan website](http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-certificates) for more information (<http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-certificates>). As of August 2016, the certificates are recorded on graduate school transcripts, and four of them (certificates I-IV) are potentially relevant to graduate students in the department. Completion of Certificate I (offering groundwork on Reflective Teaching) is required in order to take part in further Certificates II, III, and IV, but these may be earned in any order. Certificate II guides participants through the

design of their own course and may be useful for students interested in proposing a course (in or out of the department) or interested in creating sample syllabi for their teaching portfolio. Certificate III in Professional Development is most relevant for students in their fourth and fifth years entering the academic job market, as it helps you craft your job market documents. Certificate IV is the Teaching Consultant Program in which participants receive training and part-time employment as consultants and observers. This work is paid by the hour; in the past, however, the Sheridan has struggled with paying students on an International student visa for legal reasons. Please consult with them if this is relevant to your case. Teaching Consultants can also gain experience as Certificate I discussion leaders.

#### **4. Events and Workshops**

The Sheridan organizes talks and workshops throughout the year, at which different aspects of teaching are discussed. In the past, topics have included include grading, interactive teaching, supporting student study habits, etc. These workshops are generally advertised in Morning Mail, but you can [sign up for the Sheridan \(roughly\) monthly newsletter](https://confirmsubscription.com/h/r/1E19758416DF465E) for more targeted information (<https://confirmsubscription.com/h/r/1E19758416DF465E>)

#### *The Writing Center*

Brown's Writing Center provides free writing support through all stages of the writing process to any member of the Brown community, including specialized support to students whose first language is not English. The Center is staffed by graduate students in their second year and above, from a variety of academic disciplines. Working at the Center is an opportunity to gain skills in teaching college-level writing to undergraduates while being compensated for your time. It also offers the possibility to gain training in teaching writing, in particular for ESL students.

The Writing Center is one of the most reliable campus employers for graduate students. As a writing-oriented institution which values fluency in one or more foreign languages, it is particularly well-suited to Comparative Literature graduate students. Associates generally work three-hour shifts during which they provide one-on-one writing support primarily to undergraduate students. [Applications](https://www.brown.edu/academics/college/support/writing-center/employment-0) are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the year and can be found on their website at <https://www.brown.edu/academics/college/support/writing-center/employment-0>.

### *Pedagogy classes*

Most Spring semesters, a graduate seminar named “The Theory and Practice of Foreign Language Learning & Teaching” is proposed by several language departments in cooperation. Taking this class may be mandatory for teaching in certain language departments, especially if it is your first time teaching (some language departments waive the requirement for students who have teaching experience and/or education degrees). It may in some cases replace one of the fifteen seminars required by the department. Consult with your DGS to find out if this class could be accepted in lieu of another. It will provide you with a solid theoretical vocabulary and an understanding of the basic concepts of the field. Note that the workload is more spread-out in this class than in the average graduate seminar (no final paper, but weekly assignments).

The Department of English also offers a yearly class, the “Seminar in Pedagogy and Composition Theory,” which prepares their graduate students for teaching college-level writing (usually ENGL 2950). This seminar, which is mandatory for graduate students in English, may be of interest if you are considering applying in English departments at the end of your studies at Brown. As is the case for the foreign language pedagogy class, you should discuss taking this class with the DGS if you think it will be valuable for your training.

## Resources for New (and Not-As-New) TAs

### *Pedagogical Support*

Among the challenges that you may encounter in any given section, research, close-reading, and writing deficiencies may be the most common. While you may need to address these in your sections, there are some resources that you can use if you do not have the time to talk to these issues in the classroom, or if the problems are limited to some students only.

### **Research-related support**

Your subject librarian can help in several ways:

As research support for your students: you can simply include their name in your syllabus, or refer students in difficulty to them (to help them create a bibliography and evaluate their sources, for instance). You can also invite them into your classroom to discuss proper research methods at the college level.

To centralize research resources for your class: librarians can create Course Guides, i.e. class “capsule” websites with research resources specially adapted for your class, or can come to your section to discuss research resources and methodologies. You can see [examples of Course Guides](http://libguides.brown.edu/srch.php?guide_type=course) at [http://libguides.brown.edu/srch.php?guide\\_type=course](http://libguides.brown.edu/srch.php?guide_type=course).

In all cases, of course, remember your professional courtesy and be in touch with the librarian before they are contacted by students, so that they can prepare to answer in line with your objectives for the class. A [list of subject librarians](http://library.brown.edu/about/specialists.php?sort=selector) can be found at <http://library.brown.edu/about/specialists.php?sort=selector>.

### **Writing-related support**

You can always refer students with writing difficulties to the Writing Center: upon appointment, Writing Center Associates can help them deal with every aspect of the writing process, from deciding on a topic to editing a final draft.

The Writing Center also offers specific support for ELL students (English-Language

Learners, or students for whom English is not their first language), including:

- Individual writing conferences with Writing Center Associates, many of whom are trained to support ELLs
- English Language Learner Seminars and Workshops (students can enroll via ASK or by [emailing `esl\_writing\_brown@brown.edu`](mailto:emailing_esl_writing_brown@brown.edu))
- Individual appointments with staff ELL Specialist. The position is in transition as of the writing of this handbook; please direct your students to contact [ELLWriting@Brown.edu](mailto:ELLWriting@Brown.edu) for an appointment

Finally, consider using the following syllabus statement: “If English is not your first language, please inform me if you feel that you might need additional support. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. For more information about language support services, contact the ELL specialist at the Writing Center at [ELLWriting@Brown.edu](mailto:ELLWriting@Brown.edu).”

### *Other supportive campus agencies*

The Department is committed to supporting students representing all sorts of diversity in the classroom, including (but not limited to) students of colors, LGBTQ+ students, first-generation students, International students, and more. There are a number of Centers on campus that can provide you with assistance and training to live this commitment in the classroom. Do not hesitate to consult with them if you encounter difficulties in the classroom as you work through what it means to create an environment respectful of student diversity. In particular, the LGBTQ centers periodically holds Safe Space Trainings throughout the year (you can [contact the LGBTQ Center](mailto:lgbtq@brown.edu) at [lgbtq@brown.edu](mailto:lgbtq@brown.edu) to find out about next trainings), which can provide a template to think about diversity issues. You can also consider including a Diversity Statement in your syllabus. A document presenting a few examples of Diversity Statement is included in the Graduate TA Google drive under “Section Syllabi.”

Additionally, if one of your students requires accommodations linked to disabilities in one of your classes, such as extended time on in-class tests or note-taking, you may [contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services](#) for help ([seas@brown.edu](mailto:seas@brown.edu)). They can provide proctors for tests taking place outside of regular test hours, help you recruit note-takers, or provide class material in accessible format (for instance by scanning books for students who need readers). The Google drive contains a brief presentation of the ways in which SEAS can help you support students with disabilities (“Accessibility Support”). They notably recommend

including the statement below in your syllabus: “Please inform me if you have a disability or other condition that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. As part of this process, you may need to register with Student and Employee Accessibility Services (SEAS) and provide me with an academic accommodation letter from them. For more information, contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.”

### *On-Campus Space*

If you need on-campus space to meet with students, but would prefer a more private venue than the department’s communal graduate student office, you do have a few possibilities on-campus:

**The Sarah Doyle Women’s Center** lets graduate students use one of their rooms (room 204) for office hours. If it is free at the time that you want it, you can place a weekly reservation on it at the beginning of the semester. You can contact them at [sdwc@brown.edu](mailto:sdwc@brown.edu) to inquire about the room. They are located at 26 Benevolent Street. Remember not to close the door (for liability reasons). Note that the room is up one flight of stairs and may not be accessible to students with certain disabilities, so adjust as necessary based on the composition of your class.

**Study rooms at the Science library** can be reserved for up to two hours, but the reservation can be made at most one week in advance. They are a good solution for working groups and extra study sessions, as they require at least three students to be made. To learn more, see the [library website](https://www.brown.edu/academics/science-center/study-rooms-and-collaborative-spaces/reservation-policies) at <https://www.brown.edu/academics/science-center/study-rooms-and-collaborative-spaces/reservation-policies>

**Meeting rooms in the Rock Library’s Graduate Student Center** (upcoming at the time of writing): small meeting rooms that graduate students can use to meet between themselves or with undergrads will be available as part of the upcoming renovation of the graduate student space at the Rock, but reservation policies are not yet known.

The Rock and the SciLi both have individual tables in their front areas; these, as well as coffee shops, are popular with some TAs who do not mind a busy space as long as they have an individual meeting area. See what fits you!

### *Helpful Documents*

As a TA, you are not required to hand out a syllabus, but we recommend that you consider putting together a simple document—a “section syllabus” if you are running a section, or a contact sheet if you are not—summarizing information that your students are likely to ask

you again and again, like your office hours or email policy. You should also consider including any type of classroom or assignment policy that will be specific to your section: for instance, if you want to ban laptops or make your cellphone policy explicit, a section syllabus will provide you a space to do so. Resources that you think may be useful to students, a Diversity Statement, and an indication of your attendance and make-up policies will not go amiss either.

Several section syllabi put together by graduate TAs in recent years are available in the Graduate TA Google drive to provide you with inspiration.

# Grading

## *Procedures*

As mentioned above, all TAs will be called on to grade during the course of their assistantship. Grading must be shared evenly between the professors and all TAs for a class. Depending on the professor with whom you are working, you may be called on to enter grades in the Canvas grade book and/or Banner yourself, or you may be requested to transmit the grade to the professor. Consult with them to know what will be the case and, *especially at the end of the semester*, what deadlines you will need to abide by for sending the grades to the professor or entering them in Banner (the grading function is available under the “Faculty Services” tab). Be especially wary of deadlines for your graduating seniors, which may be earlier than for your other students.

Some professors systematically oversee grading, and will give you feedback on it, some organize grading sessions where TAs share a few examples of their grading (to encourage consistency across sections), while others leave their TAs entirely in charge of their evaluations. If grading is unsupervised and you are uncomfortable with that fact, it is always appropriate to request further help from the professor or other TAs. For instance, TAs have requested to sample a few graded copies from their professors or shared a few of their own graded copies to calibrate their assessments and check what constitutes appropriate feedback. They have also occasionally organized communal grading sessions independently of the regular teaching team meetings. In these situations, always make sure to protect your students’ confidentiality. It may be a good idea to meet in a private location, or at least not in an overly busy space.

## *Grade Options at Brown*

[adapted from: <http://www.brown.edu/academics/college/support/faculty/grades>]

When registering for courses, Brown students must indicate whether they are taking a course for a grade (G) or satisfactory/no credit (S/NC). Students may change their grade option for a course during the first four weeks of the semester. No grade option changes are allowed after the first four weeks of any semester.

Students use the S/NC option for a variety of reasons, but most students agree that S/NC allows for exploration of a particular topic without the stress and pressure that a graded

evaluation may impart. You may encourage a student who is concerned about your course to choose this option: they can do better in S/NC courses simply because they are intrinsically motivated and less afraid to be more creative in their writing without the pressure of a grade.

*N.B. If a student has done extraordinarily well in a course taken S/NC, faculty have the option of adding a "distinction" to the S-grade to indicate the high quality of the work done. Academic honors such as magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa are awarded on the basis of the number of grades of "A" or "S with distinction" in a student's record.*

### **Course Performance Reports (CPR)**

Any student regularly enrolled in a course may request a Course Performance Report (CPR) and, at the instructor's discretion, receive one. Instructors of mandatory S/NC courses are obliged to honor such requests. For all other courses, instructors may decline to submit such a form if they have inadequate information to do so. Students are required to request CPRs before the end of the term.

Course Performance Reports are not part of a student's official academic record or transcript, but a student may request that the University send out one or two CPRs with their official transcripts. In such cases, students must provide the Registrar's Office with copies of the CPRs when submitting their transcript requests.

### **Changing Course Registration**

Students can (and do) drop and add courses using the online registration system for the first two weeks of a semester without charge (Brown's "Shopping Period"). Course additions made in weeks 3 and 4 are rarer, since they require the instructor's signature and are assessed a fee. Students are not allowed to add a course to their schedule after the first four weeks of the term.

### ***Grading Rubrics***

A useful tool for grading is a teaching rubric (a few examples are included at the end of this section). Grading rubrics request a time investment upfront, as you have to design them, but can have advantages:

- They encourage consistent grading;
- They help a teacher make their evaluation criteria explicit to themselves and their

students, saving everyone time and headaches;

- If communicated to students *before* they write their papers, they can help them improve the quality of their writing;
- They can also constitute a sort of “contract” between teacher and students, limiting the amount of *ad hoc* negotiation susceptible to happen;
- They can speed up the grading process;

And finally, by making your grading criteria more visible to yourself, rubrics can help you diagnose where your students are excelling or falling short (either individually or as a group), which in turn is useful knowledge to adjust your subsequent classes.

An objection occasionally made to rubrics (other than the time they take to prepare) is that they can decrease flexibility in assessment, and bias the teacher towards technical criteria at the expense of the students’ creativity—in short, they can be reductionist. If you decide to use rubrics, be aware of this potential pitfall and sure to give yourself enough leeway to recognize excellent work in all its forms, even the most original. That can be achieved by using more holistic / less analytical rubrics as well as by including originality among your criteria, or other solutions your own creativity may suggest.

We have included some rubrics used by former graduate TAs in the Graduate TA Google drive. The Sheridan center also offers [many on-line resources to help you design grading rubrics](https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/assessing-student-learning/grading-criteria-rubrics), available at <https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/assessing-student-learning/grading-criteria-rubrics>. They also regularly offer a workshop on grading in which to get more information about rubrics.

### *Troubleshooting Student Assessment*

Some students will occasionally bring concerns regarding their grades to you. Always welcome them with an open mind, and be ready to explicit your grading. Try to resolve the situation in consultation with the student first. If, however, a disagreement remains, let the student know that you will consult with the professor supervising the class and discuss the situation with them. If the situation still does not resolve at this point, refer the student to your supervising professor.

A more serious concern occurs when you observe a student violating Brown’s Academic

Code (such as fraud, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct). Always discuss the situation with the professor in charge of the class, who bears primary responsibility for reporting incidents to university authorities. If, based on your knowledge of the student, you think that milder disciplinary actions are warranted (i.e. lowering the grade, requiring a rewrite of an essay, etc.), make sure to make that recommendation explicit to the professor. Ultimately, they bear the responsibility of addressing such violations, but you may have a better sense of what is just a careless mistake, and what is intellectual dishonesty.

CIS offers access to a software, Turnitin, which may be helpful in detecting plagiarism. In recent years, some ethical objections have been made to the software, on grounds that it shares student writing with the company Turnitin. A *Chronicle* article on this point is included in the Graduate TA drive; as always, use your discretion (and a discussion with your supervisor) to decide whether to use it or not.

## Getting Feedback on Your Teaching, and Building Your Research Portfolio

While you are teaching in graduate school, it is easy to forget that teaching is part of the skills that you are building for the job market, and that you should be documenting your successes to make building your teaching portfolio easier when the time comes. Obtaining feedback on your teaching throughout your graduate school career is therefore important for your personal improvement and for your portfolio. As far as the latter is concerned, we recommend that you try to obtain as much feedback as possible, using it both to know your teaching style better—and be able to describe it compellingly—and be able to provide solid, well-informed teaching references when necessary. You can also obtain feedback on your teaching from students, professors, and the Sheridan center’s teaching consultants.

Because you will be building your portfolio from the feedback obtained throughout your graduate student years, we include together in this section both “getting feedback” and “building your portfolio.” We strongly recommend that you conduct both in tandem over your graduate school career. Separating both activities may leave you stranded for material when the time to finalize your portfolio comes.

### *Student feedback*

The department, like all departments at Brown, requests that students fill out Teaching Evaluations at the end of each class that they take. These evaluations serve several purposes: to monitor the quality of teaching at Brown, help the department make staffing decisions, and help you improve your teaching. In this respect, you are no different from the regular faculty, who are required to collect confidential student evaluations near the end of each course. The department now has a standard evaluation form for this purpose, which students access online. A section of this evaluation refers to TAs, who are strongly encouraged to review their evaluations each semester. They are available through <http://selfservice.brown.edu>.

When you get your evaluations, we recommend that you save them for the teaching portfolio that are now almost systematically requested on the academic job market. Coming from students, a few evaluations representative of your strengths as a teacher will be an asset to this portfolio. You can also note how students grade you, and photocopy samples of student work together with your comments and grades on them (with the student assent, of course, and anonymizing as necessary). Finally, picking a point or two of what you judge is legitimate criticism, and working to improve on it in your next assignment, will both improve your skills and allow you to concretely speak to your development as a teacher when the time comes.

Of course, you are not obligated to wait until the end of the semester to collect feedback from your students, nor should you! From least informal to most informal, you can for instance use chats with your students at the end of class, exit or entrance tickets, or a structured mid-semester request for confidential feedback to gather this information—and act on it.

If you are not running a section, it is not always as obvious to students what they should assess you on, and your evaluations may suffer from that fact. In this case, make sure that the professor introduces you and clarifies your role to the class at the beginning of the semester, and again indicates what criteria the students should use to assess you at the end of it. Giving a lecture, running a workshop, or making attendance to your office hours mandatory (at least once or twice through the semester) should be considered in this case, to give students more exposure to you as a teacher and mentor.

### *Getting Feedback from Faculty*

At some point during your graduate career, you may ask a member of the faculty, or the faculty member lecturing the course you are assisting, to visit one of your classes and write an evaluation. Prepare him or her with copies of your syllabus, if appropriate, or a good description of what you have been doing in discussion section and your teaching objectives in both cases. Such a visit can help jump-start your teaching if you feel you are not doing as well in the classroom as you would wish. Toward the end of your graduate career, you might also benefit from inviting a faculty member to visit your class and write a teaching letter for your dossier in preparation for your venture onto the job market.

If the faculty member whose visit you would like is teaching at the same time as you, you can also request a Sheridan Teaching evaluation (see below): it will provide you with a video of your teaching. You can ask for the faculty member of your choice to review the video and give you feedback based on it.

### *Sheridan Center Teaching Consultations*

There are two main ways for you to obtain teaching feedback from the Sheridan Center: 1) to request a consultation from their Graduate Teaching Consultants, and 2) to request a

consultation with a Sheridan Center staff member to discuss specific teaching concerns you may have. The various types of consultations available at the Sheridan center and their contact information are [listed on their website](https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/consultations) (<https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/consultations>).

Teaching Observations are frequently used by graduate students, as they provide feedback on classroom teaching. They are conducted by Sheridan Teaching Consultants: graduate students who have completed their Teaching Certificate I, undergone a teaching evaluation, and are regularly sent on Teaching Consultations in pairs. The Sheridan always sends at least one experienced consultant on each observation. Early in the Fall semester, observing pairs are often constituted of one very experienced consultant and one beginner; as you progress throughout the year, more and more pairs include two consultants who each have several observations under their belts. Consultants will come in your class to film and observe you, then debrief your performance with you, based on your teaching objectives. You will be given the film to download and watch, so that you can get a better sense of your performance in the classroom; you will also receive written feedback on the observation. The Sheridan used not to allow sharing of their videos or teaching debrief as part of your portfolio; moving forward, this will be possible as they will have students present during the recording sign release forms. Nonetheless, they do not recommend that you use their Teaching Consultation debriefing form, as it meant to be a formative, not a summative document.

Finally, the Sheridan stores portfolios shared by graduates from previous years in their library. You can request to see them to get a better idea of the type of material you will need to collect, and how to put it together as a cohesive teaching portfolio.

### *Other Portfolio-Building Resources on Campus*

The Rockefeller Library is now equipped with a Digital Studio, in which you can record a presentation; if you wish to include a polished video of your teaching, or at least of your public speaking, as part of your teaching portfolio, you may request to book the Audio/Video Recording Suite, which is openly accessible. The Library is also considering starting a series of recorded lunch presentations of graduate student research, which could also serve as a portfolio piece. Watch their website for upcoming announcements.

## *Awards*

Every year, the Graduate School recognizes up to four outstanding graduate teachers by giving them an Excellence in Teaching Award. You cannot control nomination by the department, which is a condition of receiving the award, but you can make sure to request the “first-hand account of a class visit by a faculty member from the program or from another independent observer” that will be necessary for your nomination (and to inspire someone to nominate you in the first place!) Be discerning about this, but consider this possibility once you feel secure in your teaching; an award can be a nice complement to your portfolio. You can find [more information on this award](https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/about/awards/excellence-teaching-award) at <https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/about/awards/excellence-teaching-award>.

Should you teach at the Summer School, it also bestows an award for Teaching Excellence, the Reginald D. Archambault Award for Teaching Excellence, for which you can nominate yourself; find [more information](http://www.brown.edu/academics/professional/faculty/archambault.php) at <http://www.brown.edu/academics/professional/faculty/archambault.php>.